

[Mrs. Elizabeth Newsome]

W15017

Conn. 1938-9 [Newsome?]

Mrs. Elizabeth Newsome, age about 75, lives in a "double" house on a knoll overlooking the Waterbury highway, and within a stone's throw of the old Thomaston Knife Company (burned to the ground several years ago and replaced with a small wooden building where bakelite products are manufactured) in which she was employed for many years. The old lady is alone this afternoon; slightly deaf and obviously mistrustful of strangers, she reluctantly grants me admission to the house. When I explain that I am seeking information, however, she becomes instantly cordial.

"Why, I'll be glad to 'elp you if I can. Lord, I 'aven't thought much about the knife business lately. Seems as if it's died out completely the last few years. And look what it's done to this 'here village. 'Alf the people are gettin' 'elp from the town, if they ain't on the WPA. This chap next door, 'e ain't workin'.

"Now what's the cause of it all, young man? Suppose you give me some information. 'Ere was a good, thrivin' trade, employin' a good many people down 'ere in the village, payin' 'em pretty good money and all of a suddenty like it just come to a stop. The business failed 'ere, and some of them that were workin' 'ere went up to Walden, N.Y., and other towns and worked for a while, but it was startin' to get slack in those other places, too, and now it's about finished, so they say.

"Some say one thing and some say another. Some say it was those twenty cent foreign knives that done it. Lord, they 2 couldn't buy the material that cheap 'ere. Whatever it was it's fair discouragin' to see people's livelihood taken away from 'em.

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"I worked more than twenty eight years at the business. First in the American Knife Company and then over 'ere across the road. And that ain't countin' the time I spent at it in the Old Country. I s'pose you could tell I was born and raised over there, couldn't you? My stepfather was a blade forger, same's Jim Truelove. I done the etching. Used to do it at home, before I went to work in the factory.

"I did quite a bit of work for the Northfield Knife Company, when the Catlins owned it. Time they 'ad the strike up there, I 'ad some of their work. My 'usband—'E was a grinder—'E says to me 'Liz,' 'e says, 'I wouldn't lay an 'and to that work till the bloody thing is settled, one way or the other. If they want it, let 'em come and get it.' But they never came after it. I 'ad them knives in the 'ouse all durin' the strike, and when the factory started runnin' again, I finished 'em up.

"They stuck together, the knifemakers did, until the last few years. Then they began to get a lot of younger 'elp, and put in some machines and like that. My son worked there, and my two grandsons, over across the road, and I was forelady, in charge of the women 'elp. Mostly cleanin' and packin', was what the women did, you understand. But over in the old country, years ago, there used to be women could do a good many of the operations same as men. Except the blade forgin'. I never heard of a woman blade forger. But it was the custom, one time, when there was a good bit of work, for the men to bring 3 some of it 'ome and 'ave their wives and daughters 'elp them with it. I've seen a good bit of that myself. Fine knives, they made, too, none better. Learned the trade right, and could make a knife from the first operation to the last, a good many of them.

"Now when this little shop was a goin' strong, there was easy seventy-five or eighty people workin'. Look what that meant to the village. All them people bringin' in good pay every week. Reynolds Bridge was a pretty prosperous place, young man, and look at it now. Can't even support a store. Look at this factory over there where the knife shop used to be. That ain't any 'elp to the village. The man that owns it does most of the work 'imself. 'E as one or two men 'elpin' 'im sometimes, but I don't think 'e gives 'em steady work. 'E

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just about keeps goin', that's all. What good is that kind of a place to people? I know it ain't doin' me any good. One of my sons 'as been out of work for two years.

"Ere comes my baker, if you'll excuse me. "The baker comes in with a large basket slung over his arm. "I'll take some of them cinnamon buns, " says Mrs. Newsome, "But no bread today. Don't leave me any bread until Wednesday." She counts out the proper change from a handful of coins in a china bowl. The baker leaves.

"You 'ave to figure every penny. It ain't like it was when there was two or three in the family workin' in the shop.

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Well, I ain't much of a 'and for rememberin' things. If I was you I'd go see Jim Truelove. 'E's up on the old 'istory from away back."